Aurelie Basha I Novosejt

Book review: Mitchell B. Lerner (ed.), a companion to Lyndon B. Johnson

Article (Accepted version) (Unrefereed)

Original citation: Novosejt, Aurelie Basha I (2016) *Book review: Mitchell B. Lerner (ed.), a companion to Lyndon B. Johnson.* Journal of Contemporary History, 51 (1). pp. 202-204. ISSN 0022-0094

DOI: 10.1177/0022009415620132h

Mitchell B. Lerner (ed.), *A Companion to Lyndon B. Johnson*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012; xii + 604 pp.; ISBN 9781444333893

Mitchell B. Lerner's edited collection brings together an eminent cast of historians to provide an exceptional resource for researchers interested in Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency and the tumultuous period that accompanied it. The volume covers a broad range of issues, from civil rights to the rise of conservatism and, of course, the Vietnam War. Each chapter covers one policy area, which allows for real depth even while it risks downplaying connections and overlooks areas that might have merited separate chapters, for instance Johnson's economic policies that are addressed in just two of the 29 chapters.

One of the anthology's main purposes is implicitly, and at times explicitly, to provide a more 'dispassionate analysis' of Johnson (p. 3) or, as Andrew Johns writes, a 'more measured and generally positive appraisal of his presidency and legacy' (p. 514). Lerner has played a leading part in restoring the reputation of one of the United States' most divisive presidents and in moving the historiography beyond Vietnam. More often that not, the other contributors are less generous.

With that said, the collection effectively casts light on areas of scholarship that have been ignored or overshadowed by Johnson's failures in Vietnam, notably his domestic achievements. All of the scholars seem to agree that the Civil Rights Act of 1965 was Johnson's crowning achievement although some also mention his role in the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons Treaty (NPT) as well as more discrete accomplishments in health policy and paving the way for future Presidents from the South.

The book's greatest contributions are that it provides a set of historiographical reviews and suggests avenues for future research. Although the different contributors *do* different things with their chapters - some focus relatively more on a narrative, others exclusively on describing historiographical trends – all indicate that there is still plenty of research to be done. Pierre Asselin's chapter stands out by providing a list of resources for researchers interested the international dimensions of the Vietnam War. For new researchers interested in the period, the anthology will be an invaluable first stop.

Read as a whole, the contributions also raise important issues about the historian's craft and the challenges specific to studying the Johnson administration. First and foremost, as virtually all the authors note, Johnson left little written footprint. The presidential recordings (some of which have yet to be released) are therefore crucial resources in understanding Johnson's decisions and in producing a more considered interpretation of his presidency. Most early histories relied heavily on oral histories, interviews and contemporary accounts that defined the contours of a negative portrayal of Johnson.

Second, despite this new body of evidence, Johnson remains a riddle for historians because of his contradictory personality. Donald Ritchie, Marc Selverstone and Mark Atwood Lawrence, in particular, speak of the challenge of disentangling Johnson's opportunism, pragmatism and idealism. Both Ritchie and Sidney Milkis trace Johnson's liberalism and the influence of the New Deal on his political thinking but describe how these were often clouded by the compromises he made to enact policy.

As a political operator, Johnson cultivated ambiguity – sometimes keeping even his closest advisors in the dark - and tailored his words to his audience. For instance, Lorena Oropeza notes how Johnson led the civil rights agenda but quickly distanced himself from its achievements when speaking to Southern colleagues. In addition, new evidence increasingly casts light on distasteful aspects of Johnson's ambition, in particular his 'usurpation of presidential power' in working with the FBI to undermine civil rights groups or to defend aides such as Bobby Baker and Walter Jenkins when they were embroiled in scandals (p. 240).

A third, recurring theme in many of the chapters is the role, or lack thereof, of Johnson's individual agency. Although the tapes have granted Johnson a greater part in the momentous changes of the 1960s, even here historians offer a mixed verdict. Several authors argue that he was merely responding, with varying results, to trends that went beyond him, including the changing face of the South (Randall Woods), the looming urban crises (David Steigerwald), global trends towards environmentalism (Lawrence) or the collapse of the Cold War consensus (Johns). Furthermore, several contributors suggest that Johnson was a

custodian for many policies inherited from John F. Kennedy. The issue of continuity and change during the transition is particularly salient in Andrew Preston's chapter on the Vietnam War.

Finally, although Lerner has tried to move us 'beyond Vietnam', its shadow is manifest across the chapters as is, to a lesser extent, the shadow of Robert F. Kennedy. Most identify turning points in 1965 and 1968 that are connected to Vietnam and RFK. John Dumbrell, Kent Germany and Thomas Alan Schwartz argue that Johnson moved on policies, including on civil rights and nuclear non-proliferation, with a cautious if not paranoid eye towards RFK. The antecedents to their mutual distrust and contempt are well outlined in Selverstone's chapter. Ultimately, Johnson's early and undeniable achievements slowed and his attention waned as the Vietnam commitment took centre stage from 1965. In this respect, the Vietnam War will inevitably continue to color historians' judgments of Johnson's presidency.

AURELIE BASHA I NOVOSEJT
London School of Economics